

CLERKENWELL GREEN CONSERVATION AREA

PROPOSED SALE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PUBLIC CONVENIENCES ON CLERKENWELL GREEN BY ISLINGTON COUNCIL.

A RAPID ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE AND VULNERABILITY

INTRODUCTION.

This document has been prepared in accordance with the guidance issued by English Heritage “Enabling Development and the Conservation of Heritage Assets” on behalf of the Marx Memorial Library by Alan Wipperman BA MRTPI MRICS C Dip AF as an appropriate starting point for further discussions with English Heritage and Islington Borough Council.

The intention of the Marx Memorial Library is to help stop the sale of part of the Green in association with the Clerkenwell Preservation Group and to open discussions with the Council and English Heritage with a view to:

- (a) Providing advice and information about the architectural and cultural history of the Green as a Heritage Asset to assist decision makers in taking appropriate and full consideration of the planning issues material to their conservation decisions.
- (b) Initially, to secure the safeguarding and then preservation of Clerkenwell Green in some single form of public ownership, and then to
- (c) in the longer term safeguard the future maintenance and enhancement of the Green as a significant and locally and nationally important heritage asset within the Clerkenwell Smithfield Conservation Area.



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| Left: | A view up and across the Green but obscured by hoardings around the conveniences. |
| Right: | The immediate view towards the Sessions House with hoardings obscuring the view of this Grade 1 Listed Building. |
| Note: | Proposals for ground level enclosures of up to 4 metres in height would be taller than the hoardings. |

BACKGROUND:

The reason for undertaking this assessment arises from the proposed sale of the freehold interest in the disused public conveniences on Clerkenwell Green without prior consultation with the local community or community groups, and without apparent consideration or assessment of less damaging proposals for the re-use or re-instatement of the public conveniences or exploring other ways of enhancement of the Green.

Islington Borough Council have indicated informally that the sale of the public conveniences in the middle of Clerkenwell Green would assist in funding an improvement an enhancement of the Green, which is in the Clerkenwell/Smithfield Conservation Area. English Heritage appeared to prefer that development should not take place at all but more recently have indicated some development could be considered. If required it should be subject to outline planning consent and this should be in further consultation with the community.

Clerkenwell Green is in a Conservation Area and is therefore a heritage asset as it is a component of the historic environment of this part of London.

Despite this Islington Council may have initially sought to auction the property and then instead offered the freehold for sale in the property press with limited intentions (if any) to secure any enhancement of the Conservation Area. The Council may still be approaching the development of the public conveniences on Green as a simple sale for commercial use to secure funds for the Council or may now be selling simply to fund enhancement of the Green.

Recent correspondence suggests it may be that the objectives of the proposed sale have now been widened to secure enhancement funds with which to improve the Green and the Conservation Area. However the Councils intentions remain unclear and will not be revealed until the bids for purchase now received are presented to the public for consultation. The Council are understood to be preparing a shortlist of developer's schemes for presentation and consultation with some unspecified associated enhancements to the Green.

If this is so, it now appears that the Council's approach falls within the approach defined by English Heritage as "enabling development" where commercial developers undertake schemes to fund the enhancement of a heritage asset. This approach gives rise to serious concerns for the future of such assets as the scheme may compromise or harm their significance.

Enabling Development:

English Heritage has expressed concern with "enabling development" because of the:

"damage caused by developments and contrary to establish planning policy, put forward primarily as a way of benefiting heritage assets, but which destroy more than they save".

Consequently English Heritage have concluded *"that there should be a clearly stated presumption against such enabling development"* and that *"planning permission should only be granted if the asset is not materially harmed"*.

The applicant must show that *"any development proposed should convincingly demonstrate that on balance the benefits clearly outweigh any disbenefits, not only to the historic asset or its setting, but to any other relevant planning interests"*.

English Heritage have issued guidance to give consistent advice on proposals for enabling development, to encourage a rigorous approach by planning authorities to assess proposals for enabling development affecting any heritage asset, and to help those seeking consent by making them aware of the tests likely to be applied and the extent of information required.

This guidance is set out in "Enabling Development and the Conservation of Heritage Assets" issued by English Heritage June 2001. Although details were issued before this the concept of enabling development pre-dated this document and the Council should have informed all interested parties initially about the tests their proposals would have to face should a change of use be required.

"Enabling Development and the Conservation of Heritage Assets" (English Heritage):

This document is a policy statement and also provides guidance for considering enabling development, it stresses why detailed planning permission should normally be required, the importance of transparency and accountability in decision-making, and the necessity for detailed financial information together with a critical assessment. To date all of this is yet to be done with regard to the proposals by Islington Council to develop the public conveniences on the Green.

The document is a practical guide to assessment by local authorities, based upon the responsibility that local authorities have to conserve the cultural built heritage in their areas (Development in the Historic Environment, 1995).

Guidance emphasises the importance of Planning Briefs which should make it clear there are solutions that will not necessarily involve enabling development at all, but should include in summary:

- ◆ *at least in outline an assessment of the character and significance of the heritage asset, together with any studies already undertaken, such as character appraisals or landscape assessments;*
- ◆ *summarise the physical and policy constraints including management and maintenance implications*
- ◆ *draw attention to any opportunities*
- ◆ *and set out the aims and concerns of the authority and community.*

Such a brief would "provide the basis for preliminary discussions with potential new owners or developers" and "serve as a clear deterrent to acquisition on the basis of unjustified hope value".

As far as can be ascertained Islington Council have not done any of this assessment to date. They have issued a Design Advice Note however.

The Islington Council Design Advice Note and Offer for Sale:

The development brief issued by the London Borough of Islington in conjunction with the agent's details was called a "design advice note". It does not address many of the above matters, furthermore it does not accord with the Royal Town Planning Institute guidance on the content of development briefs generally, let alone with regard to a heritage asset (RTPI Planning Advice Note 8).

According to correspondence from Islington this Note was prepared about April 2000 (although it is dated February 2001) and produced in consultation with the Council's Conservation Officer.

This is very surprising since given this time consideration of advice to Councils covered later in this assessment, by the Government in Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 and 17, by English Heritage with respect to enabling development, and by the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Council would have been expected to have given consideration to and make reference to many more material considerations in any design advice note or brief.

Specifically the Design Advice Note makes no reference to:

- (i) National Planning Policy for Historic Buildings (PPG15) or to that relating to public open space (PPG17);
- (ii) nor is any reference made to the Green as a Heritage Asset or to the concept of "Enabling Development".
- (iii) No reference is made to the Unitary Development Plan Policy, statutory or emerging, or the Inspector's Report and Recommendations, despite the suggested uses being a departure from the statutory local plan.
- (iv) The document makes no reference to the significance to or the historical and cultural importance of Clerkenwell Green locally, or for London or the nation. .
- (v) There is no reference to the locally listed post on the Green, its possible history, or whether the railings or other features on the Green are of importance; these are not mentioned or considered.
- (vi) Nor is reference made to the financial tests that may be required to assess any planning application when submitted to the Council as enabling development.
- (vii) No consideration is made to the appropriate planning application to be submitted. Advice is clearly that an outline application is either inappropriate or not acceptable but that the proposals for enabling development should be submitted in full detail.

More importantly, it does not explore any of the aims or concerns of the local community with regard to the Green, or consider other opportunities for the safeguarding of the asset, other than commercial development. There may be available funding for less detrimental alternative futures for this heritage asset. Local Groups feel Section 106 funds could be made available for improvements and enhancements to the Green. These matters are ignored and remain ignored at this stage because there has been no public consultation to date.

Outline Planning Applications:

It would appear that the London Borough of Islington intend to consider the priced bids together with the commercial development proposals on the basis of an outline planning application. English Heritage may have initially indicated that this approach might be acceptable. English Heritage may not be fully aware that the proposals fall within the ambit of enabling development as the Council may now be intending to use funds generated to enhance the Green

However English Heritage have made it very clear that in the case of enabling development:

*" applications in outline will not normally be appropriate. However, if an application is made in outline, the local-authority should use the provisions in article 3 (2) to ensure that the potential impact on the heritage asset is defined. **The temptation to grant outline planning permission on the basis that a scheme of enabling development appears acceptable as a broad matter of principle should be avoided.** Once an outline planning permission has been given, resisting applications for approval of reserve matters may be difficult, as the principle of development has been established".*

It is also very difficult to understand why English Heritage appear to be ignoring their own advice to local planning authorities in recent correspondence to the London Borough of Islington. This may be because they do not as yet have the benefit of the preliminary work that Islington should have undertaken and they themselves recommend before considering enabling development.

The Commission for Local Administration Advice Note 5 on Land Disposals:

The disposal of land by way of sale by conditional contract subject to outline planning is also contrary to advice given by the Commission for Land Administration in their Guidance Note No. 5 issued to Local Authorities. This reinforces concerns over the way this matter is being handled by the Council as the site was simply offered for sale and appears to have now become a disposal subject to enabling development.

Such disposals require a Council's planning committee to be independent of the financial benefits of such transactions and so are advised not to deal with disposal in this way but to consider the planning and grant consents before marketing for sale. Furthermore the Commission advises sales handled this way are at risk to creeping changes of terms of sale and conditions which then need to be put back to all the parties interested in the property before any one can be chosen.

This appears to be happening with Islington's disposal of the public conveniences at Clerkenwell Green, and this is demonstrated by conflicting correspondence and recent press reports of the Council's intentions.

RAPID ASSESSMENT – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.

Understanding the Heritage Asset:

In the absence of any publicly available pre-sale or detailed planning brief work by the London Borough of Islington I have been asked to submit to the Council and English Heritage an initial “Rapid Assessment” of the significance and importance, the nature and characteristics of this Heritage Asset by the Marx Memorial Library. The Library was prepared to consider acquiring the conveniences if necessary to preserve the Green but the guide price based on commercial use and the restricted planning potential (if policy is properly interpreted) has ruled this option out.

Accordingly in association with the recently formed Clerkenwell Green Preservation Group, it is seeking to retain the Green in single ownership for long term preservation and seek funding for appropriate enhancement. This exercise requires Conservation-based Research and Analysis and the Library has made its resources available to me for this purpose.

Outline Over-view:

Clerkenwell Green was originally a village green, and has been an open space used by the public long before London enveloped the original rural character. Subsequently the established shape of the Green has been preserved as a public open space and despite intense urban development around it has remained an essential open setting for the important and listed buildings developed around the Green. For example the Sessions House and its entrance has been designed with regard to its domination of the Green.

The Green also has also been of the setting of or connected to many important historic events in the immediate area, with the development of parliamentary democracy and social change in London, and in the social and political history of the nation.

The Green itself is part of the heart of the Clerkenwell-Smithfield Conservation Area. Because of the history of the Green, also known as the “Middlesex Arms”, the Green is clearly a heritage asset in itself.

The significance and nature of Clerkenwell Green as a heritage asset can be defined as having three separate but linked characteristics. These are:

(i) The Green as Public Open Space (Historical Association and Use).

The Green has always been open space and no property interest has been registered on it other than that by Islington for the public conveniences provided by statutory powers. Since before medieaval times it has remained open space in public use for over a 1000 years. The Green has remained un-enclosed, a single piece of public open space now surrounded by dense development, with uninterrupted historical continuity of use for public and social recreation as well as a meeting place since well before London developed around it. The frontages to the Green have likewise been established since the twelfth century and remain much as they always have been.

The Unitary Development Plan identifies public open space to be deficient in this part of Islington and more space is needed. Consideration of national and local planning policy indicates the Green should remain undeveloped.

(ii) The Visual Amenity of the Conservation Area and Connected Character with Local Buildings and Streets (Townscape).

The Green provides a rare public open space on the edge of the City of London. Clerkenwell was identified as a place of open space by Wren in his 1666 plan for London after the Great Fire. The Green provides the essential open setting for viewing of the many attractive listed and non-listed buildings around it. The history of the Green is inextricably linked with and associated to these buildings, especially the Old Middlesex Sessions House (Listed Grade 1) and the Old Welsh School (Listed), now the Marx House and the home of the Marx Memorial Library.

The Green has long established frontages and offers attractive views across the Green as one enters from many directions on long established pathways linking with traditional routes to and from the City. Despite the many taller buildings nearby in the City the development of the frontages to the Green has not been unduly intensive and the cluster of buildings around the Green generally remain in proportion to it, or to the gently sloping site down from St James Church on the hillock above the Green.

(iii) The Cultural History of the Community, London and the Nation (Historical Associations and Use):

The Green, that became to be known as the “Middlesex Arms”, is as important as any battlefield site. It is a major battlefield site in itself in the fight for universal suffrage and for rights enjoyed today. It is as important as the meadows of Runnymede to the political history of the nation.

It has been associated with and continues to be used today as a location for public expression of opinions, political aspirations and views, from Wat Tyler during the peasant’s revolt, to Cobbett and Lenin, but more particularly with the period of the evolution of modern parliamentary democracy and parties, and the representation of the people.

The Green and the buildings and the area around it featured in the development of the Liberal Party with John Stuart Mill, Dilkes and others, in the history and split of the Liberal party into Liberal and Labour parties, with William Morris and Eleanor Marx speaking on the Green, and later the Labour Movement that has used the Green from 1890 to date as a national rallying and starting point of London May Day parades.

The Green is also used for a variety of non-political and community events and meetings, such as the Clerkenwell Festival and fetes. All of these ongoing public assembly activities are prejudiced by the proposed development.

Summary:

The use and enhancement of Clerkenwell Green should fully respect and take into account these three broad characteristics and have appropriate and proper regard to the conservation of the cultural associations and the qualities of this heritage asset.

A more detailed summary following the English Heritage advised format of the Impact on Significance is appended as a table following this page after which the more detailed Assessment follows.

RAPID ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT ON SIGNIFICANCE AND VULNERABILITY.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE.

1 HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GREEN AS A SINGLE UNENCLOSED ENTITY USED AS PUBLIC OPEN SPACE.

Clerkenwell Green has been a public open space used for lawful public recreation, assembly and meetings and has never been sold off or commercially developed. A small part has been built under to provide public conveniences in pursuit of a statutory obligation under the Public Health Acts but this was a complementary development to the public assembly and recreational use and followed the location of a urinal on the Green as can be seen on plans appended herewith.

The Green's history and association with national and local events and with buildings in the area is summarised into three periods below:

The Village Green from the Norman Period to the Middle Ages:

The Chronicler, Fitz-Stephen described the area to the north of the City of London in the late twelfth century as meadow land interspersed with flowing streams, with *"excellent springs, the water of which is sweet"* amongst which are:

"... Holywell, Clerkenwell (fons Clericorum) and St Clements Well are of most note, and most frequently visited, as well by the scholars from the schools, as by the youth of the City, when they go out to take air in the summer evenings."

Stow also mentions Clerkenwell as a location where the Parish Clerks of London, their company incorporated by Henry III in 1232 and still in existence today, with processions to the well taking place until about ten years ago, regularly performed their holy plays. The fields of Finsbury and Clerkenwell hosted wrestling events, and archery practices and competitions, and so the area north of the City was one of countryside public recreation for Londoners.

Around 1100 the Nunnery of St Mary was founded for the Benedictine Order ("Black Nuns") about the site of the present St James Church and the surrounding buildings now fronting the Green on the north side. Remnants of foundations have been found in the basements of buildings fronting the Green. Some of the records of the Nunnery can be found in the Cottonian Manuscript of the British Library.

The Nunnery was suppressed by Henry VIII in 1539 and granted to the Duke of Norfolk and so fell into disrepair.

Similarly the Priory of St John of Jerusalem to the south of the Green was founded about the same time. In 1381 during the Peasant's Revolt against the Poll Tax, The Prior of St Johns, Sir Robert Hales had particularly upset the populace so when the peasants arrived at Clerkenwell:

"they brent house, hospytall, mynster and all; then they went fro strete to strete, and slew all the flemmynges that they could find in churches or any other place"

The Priory was burnt down and was said to have burned for seven days. The peasants went on to the Tower of London and dragged out Sir Robert Hales and beheaded him on Tower Hill.

Clerkenwells history in political unrest had begun. Following the reformation the Priory was partly blown up during Edward VI reign by Protector Somerset.

The buildings of these religious institutions appear to have left some open land between The Nunnery to the north of the Green and the Priory to the south. This open space became and is the Village Green of Clerkenwell, then an open field, slightly sloping and south facing towards the City of London, with the Church of St James the Less above on the hillock just to the north and the Clerk's Well just to the north. This can be seen on Plan 1.

Clerkenwell was already well known as a place of assembly and recreation and so attracted the attention of royalty and large crowds for the mystery plays. At least once a year the Clerks assembled to perform a play on land thought to be on a sloping site near the Clerk's Well. Stow also records the attendance of the Lord Mayor in state with Aldermen to watch wrestling in a large tent near Clerkenwell on Saint Bartholomew's Day.

The First Plan showing the Green (Plan 1):

A plan drawn around 1560 shows Clerkenwell as a village with the present day site of the Green as an open space between the Nunnery and the Priory with the shape not dissimilar from that of today. Lying between Turner Street and St John's Street. (Civitas Londonium by Ralph Aggas c 1560).

It is therefore very likely that with the Well lying nearly adjacent to the present day Green and with the sloping open space available between the religious lands, that the Green that was a place of meeting and assembly for the plays, wrestling and for general public recreation for the local village community, and as described by Fitz-Stephen for Londoners.

Early Development as a Suburb:

By Stow's survey of 1598, the monasteries had been dissolved, and there were

"many fair houses for gentlemen and others are now built about this priory (the nunnery) especially by the highway towards Islington".

By 1661 the parish had some 416 houses. After the Great Fire much more development took place and Clerkenwell was likely a very pleasant residential area with many notable tenant occupiers around the Green itself, including Sir William Bowles, Knight and Baronet, Lady Povey, Lady Wright, and Sir Richard Cheverton. (Birch Manuscripts, warrant dated 1677). Around 1650-1660 Sir Isaac Walton lived by the Green and Sawbridge the eminent bookseller, published Culpeppers, the herbalist's book also lived on or near the Green around 1670.

This early leafy suburbia can be seen in Plan 2 and again the established frontages of the Green can be readily identified. The Nunnery has gone but the old St James Church can be seen and the open fields to the north show this area to now be on the built edge of London.

Bessant in his book "London North of the Thames – 1898" commented that the fascination with the Green *"lies with its memories"*.

Despite the genteel nature of the development around and near the Green, by 1746 a watch house stood near the west end of the Green, and on west end of the Green public punishment took place, with a pound, and a pillory, and as late as 1787 a woman was pelted to death for perjury in the pillory. See Rocques Plan of London 1746 (Plan 3).

Rapid development of Clerkenwell followed the end of the Civil War and Clerkenwell had 1900 houses in 1732 and 1400 in St James's Parish alone by 1753, with over 5000 by 1821. The next ten years saw extensive building and by 1831 nearly 6500 and over 7500 by the census of 1851. Pinks believed some 4000 houses were built between 1801 and 1851 and the population had grown from about 23000 to 64778, a densely occupied suburb of London.

During this period no development or enclosure of the Green took place despite intensifying development around it. In 1738 the Loyal Society of Ancient Britons decided to build the Welsh School, to educate in Welsh the many Welsh immigrants living in and around the Clerkenwell area. Built to an attractive design by John Streere, and then later in 1779, the Sessions House was built to a design by John Rogers, demolishing the existing buildings. This filled the visual frame at the west end of the Green and consolidated the appearance of the Green much as it can be seen today. These new buildings do not appear on Rocques Plan.

At that time the Green still had some trees, later lost, although now replanted, and this can be seen in the sketches and for comparison with today the photographs below and how the Green and Sessions House looked in the late eighteenth century.:



The buildings constructed by Acts of Parliament – St James Church and the Sessions House:



St James Church from Ray Street and the view today towards the Church with the Sessions House in full picture.

About the time of the drawing of the Sessions House the old St James Church which had been in ruin for many years was eventually pulled down in 1788. In the same year by Act of Parliament assent was given for the building of a new Church to be paid for by annuities. Construction commenced in the same year and was completed in 1792 using some stone from the old Church. The new Church sits above the Green by the winding Clerkenwell Close and is part of the essential village character and can still be readily viewed from the Green – see photograph below:



The Church behind Marx House (The Old Welsh School) today.

“Clerkenwell is the best preserved of the inner villages of London. It has its Green and its Church on a hillock above the Green”

John Betjeman 1963.

In Clerkenwell even the management of the Church was became a matter of dispute. In 1856 the election of the incumbent was challenged and when elected the Reverend Robert Maguire went to preach in the Church. The Church was thronged with people and if it had not been for the good sense of the Reverend:

“a most lamentable scene would have taken place in the Church”. (Pinks).

At a Consistory Court heard in 1857 the Court decided that the inhabitants of the Parish had the right to elect their incumbent.

The Churches of the area also sponsored temperance meetings and the drinking fountain erected on the Green. The fountain also features in drawings of meetings as a climbing frame to afford a better view .

There is also drawing of Cardinal Manning administering the temperance pledge on the Green in the late nineteenth century.

Urbanisation and the Political Period:

The rapid development of London and the increasing density of development combined with increasing poverty in the Clerkenwell area, resulted in a decline in the quality of the area around the Green.

Nearby the Ray Street area, earlier known as “Hockley in the Hole” and can be seen on Plan 3, had become a disreputable area. There were bear gardens for bear baiting, dog and cock fighting, and the area was also known for its prostitutes. It was also where the dung hills were deposited by London’ night soil men, and the mire from bad drainage towards the River and the poorly maintained rutted roads made the area difficult to traverse. It was already known as a place to be “vile and low” and disturbances in this part of Clerkenwell needed 30 or 40 men with cutlasses to quell them and it was not a place entered lightly by bailiffs or sheriffs.

By 1744 the Grand Jury of the Middlesex Sessions observed in their presentation of that year:

... places riotous of great extravagance, lazyness and idleness and ill fame, several houses ...” (including) “ ... a place called New Wells Near London Spaw Clerkenwell within this County where great numbers of disorderly people meet”.

Inevitably the area around the Green itself also deteriorated. In September 1816 a house “formerly part of the Royal Palace of the Stuarts” fell down. The larger houses were divided up, the tenements teemed. It was noted that additional pressure was put on the housing stock by Improvement Acts to build new roads through the area, such as Farringdon Road, and the railway by Hockley in the Hole area led to its redevelopment for industry. In 1840 the case for the Farringdon Road Act included the removal of houses and tenements “in a very ruinous and dilapidated condition”.

By the early late 1700s and early 1800s Clerkenwell had ceased to be a resort but had become an area of artisans and industry and increasingly of political discontent. The Green proved to be central to the expression of the areas discontent and essential to its expression.

Political Action:

By March 1768 riotous behaviour was reported in Wood’s Close just off the Green by Wilkes supporters shouting “Wilkes and Liberty” when liberty was potentially seditious. Clerkenwell featured in the Gordon Riots of 1780 when prisoners were released from Clerkenwell Bridewell prison.

By 1799 the London Corresponding Society had set up a branch in the Bulls Head in Jerusalem Passage the pathway is still in existence and just off the Green, to further opposition to war against revolutionary France.

In 1794 Spencean Philanthropists met in a pub in St James Walk also just off the Green to promote land nationalisation. Clerkenwell had become established as a centre for radicals to meet and promote their ideas and demonstrate.

In 1826 William Cobbett addressed a large meeting on the Green to protest against the Corn laws. Again in 1832 Cobbett with others again was at the Green but to appear at the Sessions House following demonstrations of over 100,000 people organised by the National Union of the Working Classes against a day of fasting as a response to cholera outbreaks.

Arrested to answer charges of “with force and arms made a great riot, tumult and disturbance”, Cobbett was acquitted to great cheering inside and outside the Court. The Court’s jury in 1833 failed to find the killing of a policeman murder but as reasonable homicide after a fight outside the nearby Middlesex House of Correction.

These events covered in more detail below confirmed the Green’s association with public assembly and political events where ordinary people sought and fought to gain influence over government and to secure the vote. Following this period the Green was then used to advance the interests of employed labour and the labour movement and the development of modern political parties. This use continues to today with the presence on the Green of the Marx Memorial Library and its use as a starting point for the London May Day parades held since 1890 as well as many other events political and non-political.

It was not until the 20th century that the necessity of public conveniences was recognised and these were installed under the Green using the Public Health Acts. These did not of themselves affect the open character of the Green, unduly disturb access across the Green, or affect its use for public meetings and assembly, indeed when available they complemented this use.

In the present day the Green is used by residents and office and other workers for rest and relaxation during the busy day. It could provide considerable additional potential for restoration and enhancement by respecting its use and history especially with regard to visual amenity.

2 CLERKENWELL GREEN - VISUAL ASSESSMENT AND ROLE AS URBAN OPEN SPACE.

Clerkenwell Green was and remains a village green with a discernable village ambience and nature of the development around remains essentially characteristic of an English village. When last threatened with development and sale in 1964, John Betjeman, the Poet Laureate, wrote:

“Clerkenwell is the best preserved of the inner villages of London and the nearest village to it. It has its Green and its Church on a hillock above the Green, several houses survive of those which surrounded it, a remarkable haven of peace amid the roar of public transport and heavy lorries”.

As considered above the broad shape of Clerkenwell Green had been determined for hundreds of years and was well established by the mid-sixteenth century. The present buildings generally follow the boundaries between the religious foundations. This is further confirmed by Rocque’s large map of London of 1747 which also identified the footpaths fronting the Green which were then “skirted by lofty trees and several stood in front of houses on either side of the Green and two on the north east corner of Aylesbury Street”. (Pinks).

“Many years have not elapsed since the Green was decorated with rows of trees, chiefly sycamore, ranged before the houses”. (Cromwell 1828). The last tree on the north side of the Green blew down around 1796 as can be seen in the drawing of the Sessions House above.

The Green was no longer a Green by 1665 and this was noted in popular verse:

*“.....Your Green is grey, no spire of grass
For many years being seen of those that pass”*

(From Falsehood Chastised or the shepherds vindicated from a scurrilous libel of some Rotten Sheep about Clerkenwell Green and Mutton Lane).

By the late nineteenth century the Green was mainly cobbled and was so in part into the late 1950s and the present tarmac finish removed the ground level detail that previously prevailed.

The Green has a number of significant townscape views that appear on approaching the Green and which define and recall the character and quality of the Village, and provide pleasing ensembles of Georgian and Victorian elevations which by accident or design delight the eye.

Views Approaching the Green:



The view of the Green and Church when entering the Green from the South.

From the South:

When the Green is approached from the south as though one were approaching the village from London the view up the hill opens up across the Green with the colour washed render of the Old Welsh School set before the white stone of St James's spire rising above the Green off the Close behind.

Views from the west and south corner of the Green are dominated by the spire of St James Church with mainly 2 and 3 storey buildings below, including the listed three windowed Old Welsh School with pediment over on the north side of the Green. Car parking and the temporary hoardings around the conveniences on the Green give some feel for the nature of potential obstructions to the view. The presence of trees and benches confirms the true nature of this open space despite much of the area being lost to vehicle use.

The depth of view encountered as the Green is entered from the south is in suitable proportion as a foreground to these buildings, and the open sky above the buildings marked by an absence of tall buildings as a backdrop means this view is not marred and its remains much as it was in the mid-eighteenth century. However the absence of wide pavements and the dark and extensive tarmac highway does detract from the scene.

There may be potential for an enlarged Green and reduced highway with a cobbled surface which could give a more appropriate scale to the road width and a traditional finish which would improve the Village ambience. This can be seen in Picture 1 attached.

From the East:

Likewise the view from the east on entering the Green which opens out towards the Old Sessions House, a grade 1 Listed Buildings is impressive with the building dominating the Green.

The drawing of the elegant Sessions House which was built in 1779 is shown standing fronting the open Green still with trees. By 1826 the trees had been cut down and by 1831 the open space had been partly hard surfaced. The drawing has already been shown above.

The present day view could be made very similar and although the lofty row of trees have been replaced with more sporadic mature trees and this does in the summer obscure the dominance of the Sessions House. This elegant building like the Church built by Act of Parliament and dominates the sloping Green by the use of a rusticated basement to support an entrance by flight of steps up to a level at the same height as the far side of the Green. The building is faced with a central façade of Portland Stone adorned with four Ionic pillars and two pilasters.



The Sessions House from the different sides of the Green at the same level as the entrance doorway.

The sketch shows how the open and unencumbered Green without urban clutter or enclosure once looked and provided the appropriate and simple setting for this historically important and dominant building. An enhancement scheme for the Green could look for a return to a more sympathetic and uncluttered setting for this building than is found today.

View from the North:

The view from the north is limited as the Green is bounded by building frontage that probably aligns with the original boundary of the Nunnery and is without a street entrance other than from Clerkenwell Close.



The eye is drawn to The Sessions House and it is immediately seen on entering the Green from Clerkenwell Close.

The entrance into the Green from the Close was widened by the Parish as there was only room for a single coach to pass. The Parish purchased and demolished a butcher's shop opposite the

Crown Tavern and this also opened up the approach and view to St James Church from the Green. This change can be seen between Plan 3 and later OS maps Plan 4 in contrast to the present situation.

Clerkenwell Close where Sir Thomas Challoner knighted in 1547 by Lord Protector Somerset for bravery at the battle of Musselburgh resided for many years is still very much a village lane by the Church. Whilst Elizabeth's Ambassador to Spain he wrote "The Right Ordering of the English Republic" around the 1560s and published his works on return in 1564.

The view from the west:

The view back towards Aylesbury Street is marred by a probably unnecessary expanse of tarmac highway, the presence of parked cars and the hoardings. Again the absence of urban detail damages the scene but there could be enhancement. The presence of "lofty" mature trees again fronting houses (but now offices) on the south side of the Green, and again trees on the "corner of Aylesbury Street recalls aspects of the eighteenth century Green, and the building frontages which follow the established boundaries and for most part, and still of traditional heights still reflect this leafy suburban village.



- | | |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Left: | The Clerk's Well is on the left within the building and the Sessions House is seen much as it may have looked arriving from Hockley in the Hole and Townsend Street. |
| Right: | The view across the Green from the west by the Sessions House. |

Summary:

At the heart of the Clerkenwell Conservation Area is the original Village Green which retains its historic shape and appearance as an unenclosed informal urban space. The massing and scale of buildings remains traditional with mostly 2 or three storey buildings to the north side of the Green. Save where the land falls more steeply away towards the west, and roof heights are maintained, or where the rather more taller Clerkenwell House is fortunately discreetly located. To the south side with three to five storey buildings of good visual interest and scale appropriate to the period when the Sessions House was drawn and still with some trees to the frontage.

The Sessions House continues to dominate the Green and was clearly designed and built to be viewed unobstructed and imposing with regard to the gradient of the Green which it faced.

Visual Principles:

Conservation Area policies should have regard to the Village Green ambience. Now in an urban setting policies should maintain protection for the traditional “walk up” heights and massing of buildings around the Green. The presence of taller buildings on the south side and lower on the north side should be respected in future development to maintain the appearance of the spire of St James on the hill behind the Green.

The Green should provide a clear and unobstructed open space to provide a proper visual setting for the enjoyment of the views of the buildings around and behind the Green (especially those built by Act of Parliament) and the important buildings that dominate it, and use it as an appropriate setting. The Sessions House should have the Green clear and unobstructed as before as the designers of the time intended.

The Green still does today and could better provide a calm and pleasing appearance for public use, meeting and relaxation for all, as it has always done, especially if enhancements have regard to the need for sympathetic detailing of the finishes for road and pedestrian surfaces.

Although grass may be a welcome change to this otherwise hard surfaced area the Green was recorded as being no longer grass but grey by 1655 and the townscape here does not demand a grassed surface. The trees however are important to continuity in the history of the Green provided the views of dominant buildings are not obscured.

Much could still be done to enhance the Green with modest improvements to accord with Traffic Advisory Leaflet 01/96.

3 THE ROLE OF CLEKENWELL GREEN AS THE CENTRE OF A BATTLEFIELD SITE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY AND THE FORMATION OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IN ENGLAND.

Clerkenwell Green stands in the centre of small area of London which has one of the most radical histories and has been as much a battlefield site as those military sites which are registered by English Heritage.

The history of the Green, the streets and passageways and buildings around it, many of which survive to this day have featured in many assemblies, demonstrations, clashes and events which are historically and culturally linked to the history of the area, of London and the Nation.

There is little doubt that the Green was a place of public gathering from the Middle Ages onwards for assembly and relaxation but also for more tumultuous events. There is a history of association with protest against unrepresentative law and government from Wat Tyler and the men of Kent protesting against the first Poll Tax, when they sacked and burned the adjoining St Johns Priory, to the development of the publishing trade to avoid London taxes and with it the formation of clubs and groups of radicals who would hold meetings on the Green or in the nearby taverns and coffee houses, and publish papers and pamphlets. From these early clubs and gatherings began the larger rallies and processions and eventually the “monster demonstrations” that helped secure the vote.

The Green became an honorary Tavern known as the Middlesex Arms, and still today the Green is a focus for the start of the London May Day parades, other political rallies and marches and is home to the specialist Marx Memorial Library.

A summary of some of the events and associations relating to the Green and is set out below:

- 1381 The burning of St Johns Priory and houses in the village by Wat Tyler and the men of Kent protesting against the Poll Tax. Followed by the beheading of the Prior.
- 1539 The Nunnery suppressed and shortly after Protector Somerset blows up much of the Priory.
- 1557 There is a revival of the Order of the knights of St John of Jerusalem.
- 1560 Clerkenwell Green recorded on a map.
- 1564 Sir Robert Challoner publishes from Clerkenwell Close the “Right Ordering of the English Republic.
- 1665 Clerkenwell used as a market by royal decree to aid dispossessed of London following the Great Fire.
- 1720 John Styrpe records of the well *“The Parish is much displeased that it has gone into decay and think to make some complaint at a Commission for Charitable Uses, hoping by means to recover it to common use”....“ the water being highly esteemed hereabouts”.*
- 1764 The Grand Jury of the Sessions House identify New Wells London Spaw Clerkenwell where great numbers of disorderly people meet.

The Battle for the Vote:

- 1768 Demonstrators in Woods Close near the Green shout for “Wilkes and Liberty” and the radical Wilkes elected with 70 votes of lesser property owners against 30 for the Kings candidate. Liberty could be a seditious word at that time.
- 1780 Gordon Riots result in break in to Clerkenwell Bridewell Prison and prisoners liberated.
- 1787 Woman in pillory on the Green pelted to death for perjury.
- 1792 London Corresponding Society established at Bulls Head Jerusalem Passage in opposition to the war against revolutionary France.
- 1794 Battle Bridge recruiting offices near the Green attacked by large crowd.
- 1799 Soup house set up in Coppice Row for some 7000 unemployed watch and clock makers in Clerkenwell following government tax on imported watch cases.
- 1800 William Bound and Joseph Bird Church Wardens record the moving of the parish pump to the “present location”.
- 1816 Henry Hunt (Orator Hunt) who spoke later at the Peterloo Massacre holds meeting of about 20,000 in Spa Fields north of the Green Meeting promoted by the Spenceans.
- 1816 Spenceans hold meeting in a tavern in St James Walk off the Green and proceed to break into gun shops in the City and there is a struggle with the police and cavalry and a discharged sailor is hung for breaking and entering.
- 1826 William Cobbett addresses large public meeting on the Green against the Corn Laws.
- 1827 The Illustrated London News records *“In Clerkenwell there is grovelling starving poverty”*.
- 1832 Cobbett now leader of the National Union of the Working Class appears at the Clerkenwell Sessions House accused of riot, tumult and disturbance but is acquitted. Large crowd on the Green cheer his release.
- 1833 The NUWC hold a meeting at the House of Correction, now the Mount Pleasant Post Office, and police attack demonstrators and a policeman is killed. Jury at the Sessions House refuse to convict and hold the killing justifiable homicide due to the ferocity of the police.
- 1837 Charles Dickens novel is serialised in a magazine. Oliver Twist and sets Fagin’s Lair in Clerkenwell. The novel was written in part as a response to the Poor Law Act of 1834 which ended out door relief and introduced the workhouse. Reference to the Green and buildings in Clerkenwell is made in the novel.
- 1838 Large crowds attend a meeting on Clerkenwell Green welcoming back from Australia the Tolpuddle Martyrs transported for forming a union.
- 1838 Lunt’s Coffee House No 34 on the Green was where Cobbett first heard Richard Carlisle the Reverend Robert Taylor and others, and at 37 meetings were held in the Northumberland Arms and the coffee rooms at No 38. The Friendly Society of Ironplate Workers met at the Pickled Egg Tavern in Crawford Passage.
- 1839 Chartist Convention with delegates numbering over 7000 from the North and Scotland held on the Green.

- 1842 As the Chartist demonstrations become more of a problem Prime Minister Peel prohibits the holding of public meetings on the Green. Meetings continue to be held.
- 1848 Fergus O'Connor holds mass meeting on the Green and the following week a further meeting is held with a march to Kennington Common where a major meeting takes place.
- 1848 In the year of European Revolutions mass meetings are regularly held on the Green and three Chartists arrested for seditious speeches and unlawful assembly.
- 1848 In fear of revolution the army are ordered to control the Green and on the 2 June the Horse Guards occupy Clerkenwell Green.
- 1848 A hatter living in Aylesbury Street records "We had the police every night ... we had the horse troops one night". A retired policeman recorded as saying the police were always coming into conflict with the mob.

"A famous battleground Clerkenwell Green ... there was plenty of space on the Green for fighting".

- 1848 The Duke of Newcastle notes in his diary the Chartist meetings are becoming quite troublesome:

"...for they meet in Clerkenwell to the amount of some thousands – but they require much watching both by police and soldiers".

- 1848 Again a soup kitchen gives relief to some 8,500 persons in Cobham Row. A trade union directory records 12 unions meeting in Taverns in Clerkenwell. The national impact has been quite significant, Hardy's novel refers to the demonstrations in Clerkenwell (The Return of the Native).

11 June a large meeting held on Clerkenwell Green by the London Working Mans Association called for a conference of reformers which was joined by the Reform League. 22 June a meeting of some 6000 held under lamplights on the Green followed the biggest since the 1832 reform meetings at which Passmore Edwards spoke. A procession to Hoxton followed on the 25th with over 20,000 attending.

Similar meetings were being held all over London and these meetings and events were described at the time as

".... demonstrations of the great unwashed, who never had and were never likely to have the vote".

"The excited liberal politicians of Clerkenwell Green Made London hideous with demonstrations"

- 1866 Because of Police pressure on the Liberals and Radicals it was often difficult to convene meetings in taverns and houses and so on the 16 June a meeting was called for by supporters of O'Brien to be held in "the Middlesex Arms". This was now the euphemism for a meeting on Clerkenwell Green.
- 1866 Demonstrations were held following the infamous hanging of 439 Jamaican squatters and flogging of 600 more by order of Governor Eyre and his effigy was burnt on the Green. The press refers to the *"roaring apostles of virtue on Clerkenwell Green"*.
- 1867 The Clerkenwell Branch of the Reform League assembled on the Green and then left the Green and lead the London wide procession to a meeting in Hyde Park where over

150,000 attended. This led to the Second Reform Bill but began the break up of the Liberal-led Reform League.

1868 Gladstone forced to meet the pro-fenian orator of Clerkenwell Green, Finlen.

The Move towards Radicalism:

1869 George Howell observes in his diary

"the Clerkwellians seem determined to convert the (Reform) League to ultra-republicanism".

1869 Police refuse a meeting on the Green to be held by the Poor People's Union.

1870 Working Mens National Reform League formed. Meeting at Trafalgar Square in memory of the Chartist Ernest Jones initiated by the Clerkenwell Branch of the Reform League of whom Karl Marx notes that Weston Lucraft and others also belong to the General Council of the International. At the same time a Patriotic Society was also formed and a Land and Labour League which met initially at Hoods Coffee Rooms 217 St John Street.

1871 A meeting was held on the Green (attended by 400 to 500) to support the Paris Commune. The red flag was flown on the Green and a red cap of liberty was put on the ornamental lamp post. This gained national attention. The Daily Telegraph commented:

"If they ever try to raise the barricades on Clerkenwell Green they would not be hanged by the law but ducked by an outraged people".

The City Press also recorded that Clerkenwell Green was now

"the headquarters of republicanism, revolution and non-conformity".

1872 With so much concern the Police put pressure on landlords not to allow meetings in the pubs and taverns around the Green and so the "Middlesex Arms" was often used.

1872 The London Patriotic Society were now without a meeting place and so sought subscriptions from members to find a home. In the meanwhile meetings would be held on Clerkenwell Green every week until a home was found. Supported by Liberals and Radicals the Society received £20 from John Stuart Mill with a letter from him supporting independence from coerced tavern keepers and licensing magistrates. With support from Liberal MPs and allowing membership by women, the Club found premises which it announced as being *"in a neighbourhood well known to democracy"*. It would be based at 37a Clerkenwell Green, the old Welsh School, and became known as the London Patriotic Club which replaced the many local organisations in this *"classic ground of Clerkenwell Green"*.

1872 Patriotic Society holds a meeting held on the Green and demands the release of Fenian prisoners.

1873 The Patriotic Society holds a meeting on the Green in support of the Police seeking better conditions.

1876 William Morris records a meeting of 2000 in protest against Turkish oppression in the Balkans.

- 1878 The Club elects 5 members to the Clerkenwell Vestry to oppose the enclosure of the Green.
- 1882 The Russian Anarchist Prince Peter Kropotkin visits the Patriotic Club.

The split between the Radicals to Liberals and Socialists:

- 1884 The Club withdraws from the Democratic Federation. The Federation changes name to the Social Democratic Federation. Hosts a meeting on Social Democracy. SDF Meetings are held on the Green outside. This leads to shouting matches between the radicals inside and the socialists outside.
- 1886 Meeting held on the Green in protest against repression in Ireland.
- 1887 William Morris speaks to meeting on the Green following arrest and ill-treatment of Irish MP William O'Brien.
- 1890 First London May Day parade meets at Clerkenwell Green for the traditional march to Hyde Park.
- 1892 The Patriotic Club offers its premises to the first Indian born general election candidate Dadabhai Naoroji standing for the Liberal Party. Shortly after moves to new premises in Clerkenwell.
- 1893 William Morris now supports the cost of moving printing presses for the Twentieth Century Press to the now empty property on Clerkenwell Green.
- 1888 Eleanor Marx speaks from a wagon to crowds following poor police conduct during unemployed workers demonstrations.
- 1902 Lenin offered space to work on Iskra (The Spark) by Harry Quelch at 37a Clerkenwell Green.
- 1920 Lenin asked by delegates from London in Russia: *"How is everyone at Clerkenwell Green?"*
- 1933 Marx Memorial Library founded at 37a Clerkenwell Green in response to Nazi book burning.